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National Calendar of Arts and Entertainment

The Politics Of Expression

'Red' confronts artistic censorship in China, United States
BY HEATHER HARLAN

When Congress erupted into battles over National Endowment for the Arts funding a few years ago, playwright Chay Yew launched his own response to what he viewed as censorship by conservatives trying to block grants for controversial works.

Yew wanted to show that politics may shift with the times, but art always survives.



Chay Yew

Our Latest Cover



"Empires rise and fall," Yew says. "But what endures is left on the walls of museums."

Searching for a story to express this theme, he turned to actress Tsai Chin, who suggested he write about the tragic fate of many Chinese artists during the Cultural Revolution. Chin's father, a star of the Beijing Opera, and her mother were both killed when Mao Tse-tung's Red Guard tried to stamp out China's traditional culture.

Yew's research unearthed frightening lessons about artistic censorship—lessons that he said Americans should not take lightly.

"I realized this relationship and dance between art and politics always involves suspicion on both sides," he said. "The most shocking thing about the Cultural Revolution is that it took only three years to do it. The lesson is how quickly things happen once fanatics take hold ...

"This is a country based on freedom of speech—it's the First amendment," he continued. "Once you lose that, then everything else can fall."

Red features Jamie Guan, a former Chinese opera star who witnessed firsthand the turbulence of the Cultural Revolution. Guan performed with Beijing Opera Troupe No. 1—China's highest ranking

With Red, Chay Yew situates himself in a tradition of current and past theatre masters from Eugene O'Neill to Arthur Miller -- who criticise society and speak out, albeit metaphorically, for political change.

Without the playwright's explanation, however, Red communicates something quite different. At the end of the play, Sonja stands as the sole survivor. She is a woman, an Asian-American and a writer of romance novels who only reticently and for convenience refers to herself as an artist. The memory she takes away from her encounter in China is of a lullaby about meihua blossoms.

Meihua is the only flower that blossoms through the winter, the playwright explained. I think it's about men who will survive by living through the winter. The hope is for endurance.

As an outsider, Sonja has achieved success. Her great work will tell the story of Hua Wai Mun and the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. In a larger American tradition, it will criticise a repressive regime and convey the humanity of its victims. And it will sell, as will Chay Yew's tale of China.

She is a meihua blossom. With or without the NEA, art will survive and artists will endure. And those who know how to tell a moving story or present dramatic material will find support and draw a crowd.

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